National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Assateague Island National Seashore
Maryland / Virginia

Assateague Island National Seashore

BARRIER ISLANDS ARE AMONG THE MOST DYNAMIC LANDFORMS ON EARTH. FROM OCEAN TO BAY, ASSATEAGUE ISLAND IS DEFINED BY CHANGE.

The rhythms of tides and seasons shape the island. The smallest gust of wind or gentlest of waves moves sand in a ceaseless rearrangement of island terrain. While summer waves and longshore currents may build a wide beach, most of the year sand is scoured from the shore and moved southward leaving a narrow, steep shoreline. Storms can create inlets or fill them in. They can cut away dunes and wash sand across the island. The retreating dunes mark the island's westward movement. New habitats are created—old ones are reinvented. Plants and animals shift and adapt in counterpoint to these changes. On Assateague Island, nature's rhythmic processes are a brilliant display.

Natural zones shaped and reshaped by wind, wave, and current characterize Assateague Island. Distinct plant and animal communities have adapted to each zone. This north-facing view depicts these habitats, left to right, from bay to ocean.
ARTWORK: NPS / MICHAEL HAMPSHIRE

COASTAL BAYS Chincoteague Bay and two smaller bays separate Assateague from the mainland. They provide an environment rich in aquatic life and vital to ocean ecosystems. The warm, shallow waters create a productive nursery for mussels, crabs, clams, terrapin, and fish. Twice a day, tides rejuvenate these areas and ferry aquatic animals out to the ocean or into the relative safety of the bays.

Just beneath the bays' surface, in the shadowy world of the seagrass meadows, diverse marine life thrives. Blue crabs molt, hidden in the grasses. Young fish find refuge from predators. Seahorses and pipefish, vulnerable in open water, depend on grasses for anchorage and safe haven. Mud-loving creatures cluster around roots. These are the secret gardens of the coastal bays.

SALT MARSH Once considered worthless, salt marshes are incredibly valuable areas. They are complex ecosystems defined by the constant ebb and flow of salt water. Tides transport nutrients into the marsh and detritus (decaying plants and animals) out into the bay. Scavengers, like snails, amphipods, and fiddler crabs, feed on detritus. They in turn are food for high tide visitors to the salt marsh like fish and crabs. When the tide is out, a banquet is exposed in the mudflats where birds feast on the small creatures that inhabit this transitional area. Few plants can thrive in a salt marsh. Cordgrass, salt meadow hay, and saltwort are among those that can. These plants create shelter for willet and rail and hunting grounds for Northern harrier and raccoon. Horses can often be seen grazing on marsh grasses.

MARITIME FOREST The forest edge is bordered by a shrub thicket on both bay and ocean sides. This is another transition area between distinct communities. Greenbrier, highbush blueberry, and bayberry thrive here. Trees, stunted and sculpted by salt-laden winds, mingle with shrubs and vines. Guarded by this thicket, the maritime forest is sheltered from much of the wind and provides habitat for some of Assateague's other residents. While loblolly pine is the dominant tree, southern wax myrtle, American holly, and red cedar survive in the shaded understory. The forest is home to white-tailed and sika deer, raccoons, and birds like the yellow-rumped warbler and Eastern towhee. Predators like great horned owls and red fox hunt small mammals, birds, and reptiles in the woodland.

DUNES AND UPPER BEACH The dunes and upper beach are always in motion. Windblown sand and salt dictate the plant and animal life of this stark environment. Less salt-tolerant plants like beach heather and seaside goldenrod hide on the leeward side of dunes, sheltering the small but fierce dune wolf spider as it hunts its insect prey. Plants trap sand, elevate dunes, and form a malleable barrier against the assault of wind and water. Where overwash does occur, piping plovers and other birds find prized nesting habitat. The primary beach front dunes are dominated by American beach grass, with its extensive root system and ability to tolerate relentless exposure to the elements. Many creatures visit the beach, but ghost crabs enjoy a great view from oceanfront burrows.

OCEAN So visually compelling are the surf and ocean that it is easy to forget how much happens beneath the surface. Mole crabs, coquina clams, and small invertebrates thrive in the intertidal zone where crashing waves deliver food and render all homes temporary. Shorebirds dance away from the surf while attempting to dine on creatures concealed in the sand.

The ocean food web starts with phytoplankton. Most other marine life is dependent upon these tiny plants for survival. The oceans support more than half the species on earth, yet 95 percent of these waters remains unexplored, offering endless possibilities for discovery.

HAMMOND PUBLIC LIBRARY
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DEPOSITORY ITEM
8-1690

Osprey
Northern harrier
Loblolly pines
White-tailed deer
Bald eagle
Sika deer
Brown pelicans
Cordgrass
Willet
American oystercatchers
Saltwort
Prickly pear
Seabeach amaranth
Sanderlings
Great blue heron
Boat-tailed grackle
Bluefish
Horseshoe crabs
Groundsel
Diamondback terrapin
Great egret
Eastern towhee
Clearnose skate
Tree swallow
Cownose ray
Piping plovers
Lined seahorse
Redbeard sponge
Red-winged blackbird
Virginia rail
Black-backed gull
Yellow-rumped warbler
American beach grass
Common yellow throat
Seaside dragonlet
Fowler's toad
Seaside goldenrod
Monarch butterfly
Blue crab
Hognose snake
American holly

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Island Partners in Preservation

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

ASSATEAGUE ISLAND NATIONAL SEASHORE is open year-round. Camping is allowed in designated areas only. Campers may not bring firewood from out of state. Firewood must be purchased locally. Assateague Island Visitor Center is open 9 am to 5 pm year-round except Thanksgiving Day and December 25. Here you can get information and see aquariums, a touch tank, exhibits, maps, and a film about the island's wild horses. You can register for camping and get permits for the Over Sand Vehicle (OSV) zone at the Campground Office on the island. Dates and hours of operation vary for the National Seashore's Toms Cove Visitor Center in Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia. Call 410-641-1441 for information.

CHINCOTEAGUE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is open year-round except December 25 and January 1. Hours vary seasonally; call 757-336-6122 for information.

ASSATEAGUE STATE PARK'S beach and parking lot are open year-round, 9 am to sunset. Call 410-641-2120 for camping information.

ACCESSIBILITY Visitor Centers, restrooms, bookstores, and some trails are wheelchair-accessible. Service animals are welcome.

REGULATIONS Visit Seashore, Park, and Refuge websites for regulations on firearms, pets, personal watercraft, and more.

Assateague Island National Seashore is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks and National Park Service programs visit www.nps.gov.

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SURF AND SEASHORE SAFETY
National Park Service lifeguards cover North Ocean Beach (Maryland) and Toms Cove Beach (Virginia, in the National Wildlife Refuge) in summer only. The State Park also has lifeguards in summer.

Mats and floats, except U.S. Coast Guard-approved personal flotation devices, are prohibited at all lifeguarded beaches. Surf conditions are posted in multiple locations near the beach. Learn about rip currents (seaward currents) at www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov. Never swim alone.

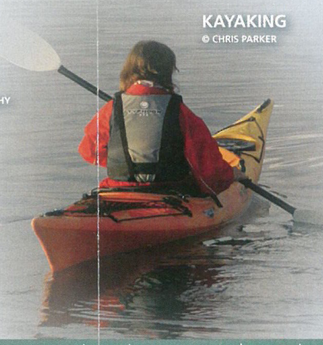
Prevent overexposure to sunlight with sunscreen or protective clothing. Biting insects are abundant spring through autumn. Insect repellent and/or protective clothing are recommended.

swimming surfing camping fishing crabbing boating

Assateague State Park

Maryland's only oceanfront state park has two miles of beach for swimming, surfing, and fishing. Lifeguarded areas are available Memorial Day through Labor Day. The campground is open late April through October. Campsites include fire rings, picnic tables, and bathhouses with warm showers. A small number of electric hookups are available. Reservations are recommended. Alcohol is prohibited in all areas of the State Park. A park store is open seasonally, offering food and souvenirs. Pets are permitted, with restrictions, in designated areas. The marina/boat launch, located on the mainland side of the Verrazano Bridge, is a popular fishing and crabbing spot and features seasonal kayak rentals. Visit the Nature Center in the campground for live animal exhibits, arts and crafts, and family fun. Entrance fees apply. Assateague State Park offers something for everyone.

BLUE CRAB
© TRISH BUDD PHOTOGRAPHY


KAYAKING
© CHRIS PARKER

BEACHCOMBING
© ANN & ROB SIMPSON

Assateague State Park
7307 Stephen Decatur Hwy.
Berlin, MD 21811
410-641-2120
www.dnr.state.md.us/public-lands/eastern/assateague.asp

paddling hiking camping swimming clamming fishing

Assateague Island National Seashore

Explore the National Seashore and discover the mysteries of a barrier island. Before traveling across the Verrazano Bridge to the Maryland end of the island, begin your visit at the Assateague Island Visitor Center. Watch a film about the wild horses. The visitor center also includes restrooms, a gift shop, exhibits, aquariums, and staff to provide information and orientation. Touch a sea snail or horseshoe crab. Ask at the information desk for a Junior Ranger booklet and have some family fun. Enjoy the park roads by bike. Observe wild horses feeding in the salt marsh. During summer, visit the Beach Hut for supplies and beverages and swim at the lifeguarded North Ocean Beach. Camping is available year-round and reservations are encouraged April 15 through October 15. Expect rustic conditions, vault toilets, and cold water showers. Electric hookups are not provided. Pets are permitted in designated areas. Avid paddlers and hikers should not miss the backcountry camping experience. The Over Sand Vehicle (OSV) zone provides an adventurous getaway (permit required). Nature trails, beachcombing, and ranger-led programs will bring back childhood memories, while guided kayak tours and campfire programs will make new ones. Entrance fees apply.

QUAHOG CLAM
NPS

EXPLORING
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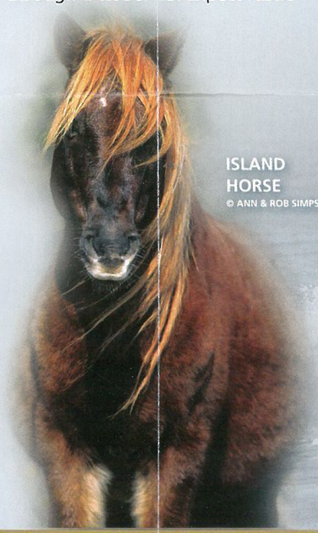
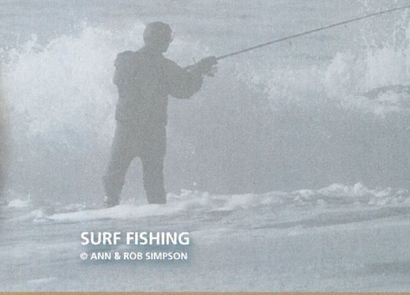

ISLAND HORSE
© ANN & ROB SIMPSON


SURF FISHING
© ANN & ROB SIMPSON

Assateague Island National Seashore
7206 National Seashore La.
Berlin, MD 21811
410-641-1441
www.nps.gov/asis

birding fishing swimming cycling beachcombing paddling

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge

Originally established to protect migratory birds, the refuge today is a destination for birders, beachcombers, anglers, and outdoor enthusiasts. Careful management of freshwater pools and marshes provides ideal habitat and feeding areas for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, and other wetland-dependent species. The refuge is a paradise for birders and photographers. Walk or bike the trails to catch a glimpse of the rare Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel or the Chincoteague "ponies." Drive the Wildlife Loop around Snow Goose Pool between 3 pm and dusk. Expect the Toms Cove hook to be closed during the nesting season of the threatened piping plover. Visit the Refuge-operated Herbert H. Bateman Educational and Administrative Center and the National Seashore-operated Toms Cove Visitor Center for exhibits, programs, and assistance. There is no camping in the Refuge, so check in the nearby community of Chincoteague. A lifeguarded beach is available Memorial Day to Labor Day. Pets are prohibited. Entrance fees apply.

ASSATEAGUE LIGHTHOUSE
© LAURENCE PARENT

PHOTOGRAPHER'S EDEN
© ANN & ROB SIMPSON

SNOW GEESE
© ANN & ROB SIMPSON

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge
8231 Beach Rd.
Chincoteague, VA 23336
757-336-6122
http://chinco.fws.gov